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A
L E T T E R
TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE
L O R D N O R T H,
ON HIS
P R O P O S I T I O N S
IN FAVOUR OF
I R E L A N D.

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A
L E T T E R
T O T H E

Right Hon. Lord N O R T H.

My Lord,

FROM what has fallen from your Lordship in regard to Ireland, I conceive you are greatly misinformed, as to the ideas of the people at large. It is of the utmost consequence, in such a moment as this, that our sentiments should not be misunderstood. If they are, apparent satisfaction may conceal real jealousy and distrust; the bane of friendship in nations, as well as in Men.

Your Lordship dwells on the address of our parliament being a petition for indulgence, not a demand of rights. My Lord, I conceive that address was to the KING OF IRELAND, without whose approbation our laws cannot be altered or enlarged. If your Lordship conceives that it was a supplication to the parliament of Great-Britain, I apprehend you are mistaken. When the parliament of Ireland addressed their King, and told him that nothing but a FREE TRADE could save their country, they could not, I am persuaded they did not, forget why Ireland had not a Free Trade; they could not forget that Ireland was bound by British acts of parliament.

But, my Lord, should it even be possible that our parliament could forget the Great Question of Right, it cannot be forgot by the people; they know it, and will remember it. As one of that people, I deem it essential to freedom, and think myself justified as a man entitled to be free, to publicly argue for my own and my country-
mens'

mens' rights. The investigation of truth cannot be improper. In this instance, I am convinced that the surest mode of promoting the welfare of both kingdoms, is to have our connexion fully explained and perfectly understood.

As an Irishman, give me leave to express my obligations to your Lordship, for the kind intentions which you have manifested to my country; I do not even believe my countrymen want more than it is your wish to give. But, my Lord, they want it in a different mode; they want what they have a right to, separated from the bounty of England. It shall therefore be the object of this letter to point out my own, and what I apprehend to be their reasons, for wishing for such a distinction.

At first, my Lord, your propositions, which have now in part become a law, gave pretty general satisfaction. Men hitherto restrained in almost every branch, naturally rejoiced at the first view of an extended commerce;

merce ; but when reason had investigated the principles, on which that extension was given ; when it was found to be a matter of EXPEDIENCY, not of right ; when it was perceived that it rather established than relinquished the power of British legislation over Ireland, * our transports sunk into a very moderate degree of pleasure ; and even that pleasure was lessened by the precariousness of enjoyment.

My Lord, we claim to be a kingdom, with every right belonging to a kingdom ; governed by our own legislature, the King, Lords, and Commons of Ireland. We complain of the British legislature making laws to bind Ireland. We alledge it is without right, and we require that the legislature of Great-Britain should relinquish a claim that we say they are not entitled to, and that they should obliterate the name of Ireland from their Statutes.

This

* The Act of Parliament lately made, [only repeals part of the English acts binding Ireland.

This is a short creed, but like all creeds admits of much explanation; let us fairly discuss it; the examination will be no impeachment even to your Lordship's abilities, though it should oblige you to correspond with a man so much your inferior in rank and understanding. If my ideas, if the ideas of my countrymen are unjust and unreasonable, we are surely entitled to an explanation why they are so. If they are just and reasonable, they should be complied with. If they are just and reasonable, and not complied with, we have a right to do ourselves JUSTICE, if ever we have the power.

Here, my Lord, I shall beg leave to ask two questions: Is the kingdom of Ireland considered by the legislature of Great-Britain as a CONQUERED NATION? If not, is Ireland considered as a FREE KINGDOM, united with England by long usage, similarity of manners, vicinage, and a common King?

If

If we are deemed a conquered nation, and as such to hold every thing we possess at the will of the English, our conquerors ; if we are in all things subject to their caprice ; still, my Lord, there is one right that I apprehend cannot be taken from us : It is a right I almost blush to mention ; it is the right of the vanquished ; the right of regaining our Freedom, whenever we are able to throw off your yoke. If you say, as I trust you will, that we are a Free People, you must allow us those rights which are indispensably necessary to the very existence of Freedom ; and if on enquiry it should be found that Ireland has not such rights, because Great-Britain has exerted an arbitrary power to which she was not entitled, Great-Britain must either relinquish such an invasion of our rights, or support it, as she made it—**BY POWER.**

What, my Lord, constitutes the freedom of a people ? What is the boasted freedom of a subject of Great-Britain ? Is it not, that he is governed by laws to which he has assented

assented either by himself or his representative? Is it not that he cannot be bound by laws that do not affect those who make them as well as himself? What, my Lord, is the definition of a slave? Is it not where a man is bound by laws, to which he never assented, and lies at the mercy of a power over which he has no controul? Weigh these two definitions, and tell me what is IRELAND?

Great-Britain's repealing part of those laws by which I apprehend she has unjustly bound Ireland, is no satisfaction, nor are we less enslaved. In fact, your propositions, and the law founded upon them, establishes that power which I, and I believe my countrymen deny. The word expedient conveys a thousand things repugnant to the rights of Ireland. It may hereafter be deemed expedient to revoke the very indulgences you now find it expedient to grant. It may be expedient to dissolve our parliament, and never call another; it may be expedient to tax Ireland by a British act of parliament, and

and enforce it by a British armament; where shall we set bounds to expediency, and how can its limits be ascertained? But, my Lord, I will venture to assert, and I now call on your Lordship to refute it if you can, that IRELAND is not FREE, whilst England has the power of binding Ireland by British acts of parliament. I will venture to assert, we are not less slaves, though British legislation never found it expedient to exert the power it claims; the most absolute Monarch on Earth may make his subjects happy, but whilst he has the means of making them miserable, they are not, they cannot be FREE.

The Irish for a long time remained in ignorance as to their situation; those amongst them who perceived it, thought it would be cruel to show them rights, without a possibility of their obtaining them. Particular circumstances has led them to particular enquiries. Enquiry has made them acquainted with their situation; and it is, my Lord, the characteristic of my countrymen to be impatient

impatient under wrongs, which they feel and understand.

I do not deceive you when I say, that this reasoning is very general amongst Irishmen. I do not deceive you when I say, we are attached to England, and seek a connexion with her, in preference to the rest of mankind. But, my Lord, our first attachment is to FREEDOM, and every other is a secondary consideration. To be in possession of Freedom, we must know what is our right. As to favours, we ought, and I am persuaded are willing to give an equivalent. But, my Lord, we wish to have the line between rights and favours ascertained; the blending them together, if possible, we are determined to avoid.

My Lord, we conceive that we are a free people, and as such entitled to a free trade. — We admit your right to shut your ports against us, but we claim a similar power as to you. If we are as FREE as England this must be the case; if we are not, we are
 surely

surely entitled to the reasons why we are not so. — We surely have a right to know why we are excluded from the undoubted privileges of a FREE PEOPLE. Can your Lordship blame us if we deem it necessary to know how we stand in point of right, in regard to Great Britain? We cannot build on a sure foundation, or expect a lasting fabrick, till this is ascertained.

Your Lordship says the Irish Parliament is to do certain things, in consequence of English resolutions. How, my Lord, can this be? How can England treat with Ireland, until the English Parliament relinquishes her claim of binding Ireland in all cases whatsoever? Is it not, my Lord, absurd? Is it not a contradiction in terms, that an English Parliament should enter into a treaty with an Irish, if an Irish Parliament is to be subject to the will of an English; and if an English act can bind Ireland in all cases whatsoever.

I am

I am aware it will be said, that this overture from an English to an Irish Parliament, tacitly admits that an English Parliament has not a right to bind Ireland. WHY TACITLY? If England means to give up this claim, why not openly? The doing so would give confidence here. If on the other hand it should be meant to deceive, to mislead by the natural idea that must arise from the one Parliament treating with the other, I will not hesitate in proclaiming it A MEAN SUBTERFUGE—a low CUNNING——unworthy of A MAN——unworthy of A NATION.

In consequence of your Lordship's propositions, I will suppose wealth pouring into this kingdom from every quarter. Here, my Lord, I will again ask a question: What security have we for wealth so acquired? If you have a right to bind us in all cases whatsoever, you must have a right to tax us. If you have a right to tax us
one

one shilling, you have a right to twenty in the pound; and had we the wealth of the Indies, whilst you claim that power, and have force to execute it, we are but a treasury, filled for the use of Great Britain. In absolute governments, wealth and danger go hand in hand, and poverty is happiness. If individuals grow rich they dare not enjoy their wealth, and are careful to conceal it. Their lives are often forfeited for supposed offences, to give a colour to the seizing of their acquisitions. The same reasoning will hold in this instance. If, whilst poor, you claim absolute power over us, by what chain of reasoning are we to suppose you will relinquish it, should we become rich? It makes no difference that this power is vested in the legislature of Great Britain, and not in a single hand. Absolute power in one or in many is the same. Its effect is equally destructive to the happiness of a state or individual.

I have

I have frequently observed, my Lord, when the subject of Irish rights has been broached, that the distressed situation of England has been introduced ; that England has been represented as a nation sunk in debt, and overwhelmed with difficulties. If it be so, I am, and I am persuaded my countrymen are sorry for it. But, my Lord, as an Irishman, I cannot conceive that I am to be a slave, because England has been imprudent or unfortunate. I cannot conceive if England was sinking, that Ireland is bound in any way, to go to the bottom with England. We are called sister kingdoms, but if we were married, there is but one country* that I have heard of, where the wife sacrifices herself on the funeral pile of the husband, and I trust Ireland is not inclined to follow so singular an example.

Be

* A country in Asia, where the bodies of the dead are burned, and the wife is placed on the funeral pile of the husband.

Be the situation of England what it may, what has Ireland to say to it? Have we ever exposed you to war? Have we encreased your taxes? Have we been the cause of a single misfortune? If your fleets have protected us, who occasioned our wanting that protection? Have we not contributed both with our blood and treasure in support of your quarrels, without sharing in your conquests? Are we not indebted, from our connexion with you, beyond our ability to pay?

My Lord, I will go so far as to say, if the ruin of England was to follow justice to Ireland, yet still we are entitled to that justice. The question must still resort to first principles, and Irishmen cannot, ought not to have a confidence in Great Britain, till those principles are fully ascertained.

It is said, my Lord, that we have long acquiesced under this claim. For argument sake I will grant it. England herself has
been,

been obliged in particular times to submit to the most severe exertions of arbitrary power; but it has been the most distinguished feature in the character of your countrymen, to watch for and seize the moment in which they had the prospect of regaining their freedom. Witness your Barons compelling the infamous John to grant them Magna Charta. Witness the decapitation of the misinformed and unfortunate Charles. And witness the glorious Revolution, by which the present king of England—of Ireland, is intitled to his crown. Will your Lordship then, or your countrymen, be so unjust as to say, we ought to acquiesce in a claim, because we have not hitherto had power to oppose it. Will you assert if at first the claim was unjust, it has changed its nature from the inattention or impotence of Ireland?

Strange arguments, however, sometimes suggest themselves. I have heard it argued, my Lord, that the King of Ireland, residing

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in

in Great-Britain, gives a right to supremacy there. To this there is a short and conclusive question; one, my Lord, that I borrow from the elegant and well-informed Guatimozin—Had the King of Great-Britain been in reality, what he is nominally, King of France; had he held his court at Paris; would Great Britain have allowed the King of Great Britain, in conjunction with the Parliaments of France, to bind them in all cases whatsoever? Apply this, my Lord, to the subject of this letter, and answer the question as you please.

In all connexions between free kingdoms advantages must be reciprocal. It must be the interest of both to preserve the connexion; or that kingdom who finds herself hurt by the alliance, will infallibly quit it the moment it is in her power. Interest is the grand-spring of action even amongst men, though a few individuals may gloriously deviate from it; but between nations it is, it must be the ruling principle.

My

My Lord, it is my wish, and I hope and believe it is the wish of every good man in this kingdom, to form an alliance with Great Britain, which nothing can disturb. I conceive this can only be done by a fair and candid enquiry into the natural rights of each kingdom. If Great Britain treats with Ireland under the idea of giving as little as she can, and that little from necessity, Ireland can neither be thankful nor satisfied. You yourselves will say that Ireland, from particular situation, has got more than you intended for her; and when that situation ceases, you will naturally endeavour to recal what you have so granted——On the other hand, Ireland looking for an establishment of rights, cannot conceive herself obliged by what is given from expediency. Whilst the great question of right remains unascertained, mutual jealousies and distrusts must affect the peace of both kingdoms. Irishmen cannot seriously wish the prosperity of a country which they conceive to be oppressing them; and England cannot be cordially our well-wisher, whilst

she considers us as a people she has wronged; as a people she must suppose anxious for an opportunity of procuring Justice.

It may be said, that finding fault is easy, but that it will be difficult to point out a mode of relief more satisfactory than the one your Lordship has adopted; I shall, therefore, in a few words, lay down what I believe would be satisfactory to my countrymen; what I know would be satisfactory to myself.

Let England declare she has no right to bind Ireland by British acts of parliament, and entirely repeal all laws hitherto made for that purpose. It has been my endeavour to prove that England in doing this, would only do justice;—suppose it done, Ireland would have a right to trade with all the world—but all the world would also have a right of choosing upon what terms, and in what instances, they would enter into commercial alliances with Ireland;

land; Great-Britain of course would have a right to say, you shall not trade with us, but on such conditions as we shall think proper to require. The Colonies would have the same right; and at this moment Ireland would have less than what your propositions, and the law founded, and to be founded on them, would give us; but then, my Lord, the matter of right would be adjusted; whatever wealth we acquired would be the wealth of Freemen, and could not be taken from us but by our own legislature; then that frightful spirit raised in the Reign of Geo. 1st. would be laid, and the fears and apprehensions of Irishmen, with the Ghost, would vanish *.

If, my Lord, we are admitted to trade with Great-Britain and her colonies, I, as an Irishman, think we should make a suitable return. If your fleets protect us, protect our trade, I think we ought in proportion

* The law declaring a right to bind Ireland in all cases whatsoever.

proportion to that protection, in proportion to that trade, contribute to their support.——These, my Lord, in my humble apprehension, ought to be the subjects of treaty between the two legislatures; then rights and favours would be distinct; a distinction which must give universal satisfaction here. If Great-Britain really means to give us a PERMANENT FREE TRADE, what can be her objection to being fully explicit. My Lord, the consequence would be, that industry would diffuse her blessings over this heretofore devoted land; then, my Lord, the merchant would plow the ocean, and the farmer his land with satisfaction and security; then Ireland would become the chearful and powerful supporter of Great-Britain.

My Lord, I cannot expect you will take either my word or opinion for the sentiments of my countrymen; but, my Lord, it is surely worth your Lordship's attention

tion to enquire how far I am right in my opinion; if by that enquiry, you find that the people of Ireland, almost to a man, deny the right in a British parliament to bind them; if you find that they acknowledge no power on earth but their King, Lords, and Commons; and will not, if they can help it, pay obedience to the laws of any other; I submit it to your Lordship, whether it would not be wise in the British legislature to voluntarily declare the Stat. 6th Geo. 1st. c. 5. no longer in force, so far as relates to Ireland, and that it was made on the mistaken idea, that England had a right to bind Ireland. This, my Lord, would heal every dissention, would banish every jealous idea from our minds.

Many other things relative to Ireland crowd upon my imagination, but as they are in general things that ought to be looked to at home, and as I wish to confine myself to the one Great Question, I shall not longer intrude on your Lordship.

In

In the course of this letter I have endeavoured to steer clear of the least offence to your Lordship. I have endeavoured to argue without passion or prejudice, and I trust I have in some degree succeeded.

I feel the fullest conviction, that an explanation of the matter of Right is essential to the welfare and prosperity of both kingdoms, and it is from that conviction I have thus ventured to address your Lordship.

I am, with great respect,

your Lordship's

most humble servant,

FRANCIS DOBBS.

Dublin, 1st Jan. 1780.

F I N I S.

